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SUBJECT: GAZA BORDER UPDATE JANUARY 26

REF: CAIRO 123

¶1. Egyptian riot police and armored vehicles continue to block Gaza cars from entering Egypt. The local press reports dozens of Egyptian riot police are forming a human barrier to block two openings through the breached border wall. Egyptian armored vehicles are also reportedly blocking roads into and out of the town of Rafah.

¶2. According to media reports, Egyptian security forces are forcing Palestinian vehicles to depart Egypt and are preventing others from entering. Egyptian security forces are focused on preventing Palestinians from moving from Rafah to North Sinai governorate capital El Arish, and have ordered hotel and apartment owners not to rent to Palestinians.

¶3. An Egyptian security contact reported January 26 that he understood an order had been given adjusting the rules of engagement to allow Egyptian security forces to use additional force, including return fire, and to remove Palestinians from Egypt and to prevent additional Palestinians from entering from Gaza. However, the contact said that Egyptian security forces have not been told to round up and expel Palestinians, or to close the border, although he expected this could change in the immediate future. Also, he was not aware of any plans to increase the number of Egyptian Border Guard Forces on the border.

¶4. Local press reports say that returning Palestinians thanked President Mubarak for "saving us from starvation." There are further press reports of "masked men" attacking Egyptian security forces at the border, injuring twelve (other reports have the number of wounded Egyptian security forces at three dozen). President Mubarak is quoted as saying that Egypt is ready to host a Palestinian dialogue in Cairo and welcomes both Fatah and Hamas. There are conflicting press reports on the Palestinian responses to this offer, with some reporting that both sides have welcomed Mubarak's call for dialogue, while others say that only Hamas has accepted the offer, and Abbas still refuses to talk to Hamas.

¶5. The following is from the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs website:

Begin quote: The Ministry's spokesman said that the events that took place at the Egyptian Gaza border and the flow of thousands of Palestinians into Egypt are a direct result of the imposed Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip...the instructions of President Mubarak were clear, allowing the Palestinians from Gaza to enter Egypt to buy food medicine and other essential supplies in light of the great ties linking both peoples, as well as Egypt's consideration of the very difficult living conditions suffered by the Palestinians in Gaza, and keeping in mind Egypt's historical responsibility towards the Palestinians. The spokesman added that the fact that Egyptian security forces did not interfere with the Palestinians stems from a solid Egyptian commitment

of embracing the brotherly Palestinian people, particularly in time of distress and crisis.

The spokesman added that, meanwhile, all sides should shoulder their responsibilities, and within this framework he stressed Israel's legal responsibility as an occupation force under the Fourth Geneva Convention and that of the authorities responsible for Gaza, which control the internal situation. The spokesman outlined that Egypt respects its legal commitments regarding the borders with Gaza, including the Rafah border crossing, pointing out that Egypt calls upon the three parties to the agreement regulating movement across crossing points between the two countries to reconsider the modalities of reactivating the agreement. End quote.

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